

Leadership

Understanding Leadership

by W.C.H. Prentice

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Summary. The would-be analyst of leadership usually studies popularity, power, showmanship, or wisdom in long-range planning. But none of these qualities is the essence of leadership. Leadership is the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants—a human and social achievement that stems from the leader’s understanding of his or her fellow workers and the relationship of their individual goals to the group’s aim.

To be successful, leaders must learn two basic lessons: People are complex, and people are different. Human beings respond not only to the traditional carrot and stick but also to ambition, patriotism, love of the good and the beautiful, boredom,

self-doubt, and many other desires and emotions. One person may find satisfaction in solving intellectual problems but may never be given the opportunity to explore how that satisfaction can be applied to business. Another may need a friendly, admiring relationship and may be constantly frustrated by the failure of his superior to recognize and take advantage of that need.

In this article, first published in HBR's September–October 1961 issue, W.C.H. Prentice argues that by responding to such individual patterns, the leader will be able to create genuinely intrinsic interest in the work. Ideally, Prentice says, managerial dominions should be small enough that every supervisor can know those who report to him or her as human beings.

Prentice calls for democratic leadership that, without creating anarchy, gives employees opportunities to learn and grow. This concept, along with his rejection of the notion that leadership is the exercise of power or the possession of extraordinary analytical skill, foreshadows the work of more recent authors such as Abraham Zaleznik and Daniel Goleman, who have fundamentally changed the way we look at leadership. [close](#)

Although the more recent work of authors such as Abraham Zaleznik and Daniel Goleman has fundamentally changed the way we look at leadership, many of their themes were foreshadowed in W.C.H. Prentice's 1961 article rejecting the notion of leadership as the exercise of power and force or the possession of extraordinary analytical skill. Prentice defined leadership as "the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants" and a successful leader as one who can understand people's motivations and enlist employee participation in a way that marries individual needs and interests to the group's purpose. He called for democratic leadership that gives employees opportunities to learn and grow—without creating anarchy. While his language in some passages is dated, Prentice's observations on how leaders can motivate employees to support the organization's goals are timeless, and they were remarkably prescient.

Attempts to analyze leadership tend to fail because the would-be analyst misconceives his task. He usually does not study leadership at all. Instead he studies popularity, power, showmanship, or wisdom in long-range planning. Some leaders have these things, but they are not of the essence of leadership.

Leadership is the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants. The man who successfully marshals his human collaborators to achieve particular ends is a leader. A great leader is one who can do so day after day, and year after year, in a wide variety of circumstances.

He may not possess or display power; force or the threat of harm may never enter into his dealings. He may not be popular; his followers may never do what he wishes out of love or admiration for him. He may not ever be a colorful person; he may never use memorable devices to dramatize the purposes of his group or to focus attention on his leadership. As for the important matter of setting goals, he may actually be a man of little influence, or even of little skill; as a leader he may merely carry out the plans of others.

His *unique* achievement is a human and social one which stems from his understanding of his fellow workers and the relationship of their individual goals to the group goal that he must carry out.

Problems and Illusions

It is not hard to state in a few words what successful leaders do that makes them effective. But it is much harder to tease out the components that determine their success. The usual method is to provide adequate recognition of each worker's function so that he can foresee the satisfaction of some major interest or motive of his in the carrying out of the group enterprise. Crude forms of leadership rely solely on single sources of satisfaction such as monetary rewards or the alleviation of fears about various kinds of insecurity. The task is adhered to because following orders will lead to a paycheck, and deviation will lead to unemployment.

No one can doubt that such forms of motivation are effective within limits. In a mechanical way they do attach the worker's self-interest to the interest of the employer or the group. But no one can doubt the weaknesses of such simple techniques. Human beings are not machines with a single set of push buttons. When their complex responses to love, prestige, independence,

achievement, and group membership are unrecognized on the job, they perform at best as automata who bring far less than their maximum efficiency to the task, and at worst as rebellious slaves who consciously or unconsciously sabotage the activities they are supposed to be furthering.

It is ironic that our basic image of “the leader” is so often that of a military commander, because—most of the time, at least—military organizations are the purest example of an unimaginative application of simple reward and punishment as motivating devices. The invention in World War II of the term “snafu” (situation normal, all fouled up) merely epitomizes what literature about military life from Greece and Rome to the present day has amply recorded; namely, that in no other human endeavor is morale typically so poor or goldbricking and waste so much in evidence.

In defense of the military, two observations are relevant:

1. The military undeniably has special problems. Because men get killed and have to be replaced, there are important reasons for treating them uniformly and mechanically.
2. Clarity about duties and responsibilities, as maximized by the autocratic chain of command, is not only essential to warfare but has undoubted importance for most group enterprises. In fact, any departure from an essentially military type of leadership is still considered in some circles a form of anarchy.

We have all heard the cry, “somebody’s got to be the boss,” and I suppose no one would seriously disagree. But it is dangerous to confuse the chain of command or table of organization with a method of getting things done. It is instead comparable to the diagram of a football play which shows a general plan and how each individual contributes to it.

The diagram is not leadership. By itself it has no bearing one way or another on how well executed the play will be. Yet that very question of effective execution is the problem of leadership. Rewards and threats may help each player to carry out his assignment, but in the long run if success is to be continuing and if morale is to survive, each player must not only fully understand his part and its relation to the group effort; he must also *want* to carry it out. The problem of every leader is to create these wants and to find ways to channel existing wants into effective cooperation.

Relations with People

When the leader succeeds, it will be because he has learned two basic lessons: Men are complex, and men are different. Human beings respond not only to the traditional carrot and stick used by the driver of a donkey but also to ambition, patriotism, love of the good and the beautiful, boredom, self-doubt, and many more dimensions and patterns of thought and feeling that make them men. But the strength and importance of these interests are not the same for every worker, nor is the degree to which they can be satisfied in his job. For example:

- One man may be characterized primarily by a deep religious need but find that fact quite irrelevant to his daily work.
- Another may find his main satisfactions in solving intellectual problems and never be led to discover how his love for chess problems and mathematical puzzles can be applied to his business.
- Or still another may need a friendly, admiring relationship that he lacks at home and be constantly frustrated by the failure of his superior to recognize and take advantage of that need.

To the extent that the leader's circumstances and skill permit him to respond to such individual patterns, he will be better able to create genuinely intrinsic interest in the work that he is charged with getting done. And in the last analysis an ideal organization should have workers at every level reporting to someone whose dominion is small enough to enable him to know as human beings those who report to him.

Limits of the Golden Rule

Fortunately, the prime motives of people who live in the same culture are often very much alike, and there are some general motivational rules that work very well indeed. The effectiveness of Dale Carnegie's famous prescriptions in his *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is a good example. Its major principle is a variation of the Golden Rule: "treat others as you would like to be treated." While limited and oversimplified, such a rule is a great improvement over the primitive coercive approaches or the straight reward-for-desired-behavior approach.

But it would be a great mistake not to recognize that some of the world's most ineffective leadership comes from the "treat others as you would be treated" school. All of us have known unselfish people who earnestly wished to satisfy the needs of their fellows but who were nevertheless completely inept as executives (or perhaps even as friends or as husbands), because it never occurred to them that others had tastes or emotional requirements different from their own. We all know the tireless worker who recognizes no one else's fatigue or boredom, the barroom-story addict who thinks it jolly to regale even the ladies with his favorite anecdotes, the devotee of public service who tries to win friends and influence people by offering them tickets to lectures on missionary work in Africa, the miserly man who thinks everyone is after money, and so on.

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fellow workers.

Leadership really does require more subtlety and perceptiveness than is implied in the saying, “Do as you would be done by.”

The one who leads us effectively must seem to understand our goals and purposes. He must seem to be in a position to satisfy them; he must seem to understand the implications of his own actions; he must seem to be consistent and clear in his decisions. The word “seem” is important here. If we do not apprehend the would-be leader as one who has these traits, it will make no difference how able he may really be. We will still not follow his lead. If, on the other hand, we have been fooled and he merely seems to have these qualities, we will still follow him until we discover our error. In other words, it is the impression he makes at any one time that will determine the influence he has on his followers.

Pitfalls of Perception

For followers to recognize their leader as he really is may be as difficult as it is for him to understand them completely. Some of the worst difficulties in relationships between superiors and subordinates come from misperceiving reality. So much of what we understand in the world around us is colored by the conceptions and prejudices we start with. My view of my employer or superior may be so colored by expectations based on the behavior of other bosses that facts may not appear in the same way to him and to me. Many failures of leadership can be traced to oversimplified misperceptions on the part of the worker or to failures of the superior to recognize the context or frame of reference within which his actions will be understood by the subordinate.

A couple of examples of psychological demonstrations from the work of S.E. Asch will illustrate this point:

- If I describe a man as warm, intelligent, ambitious, and thoughtful, you get one kind of picture of him. But if I describe another person as cold, ambitious, thoughtful, and intelligent, you probably get a picture of a very different sort of man. Yet I have merely changed one word and the order of a couple of others. The kind of preparation that one adjective gives for those that follow is tremendously effective in determining what meaning will be given to them. The term “thoughtful” may mean thoughtful of others or perhaps rational when it is applied to a warm person toward whom we have already accepted a positive orientation. But as applied to a cold man the same term may mean brooding, calculating, plotting. We must learn to be aware of the degree to which one set of observations about a man may lead us to erroneous conclusions about his other behavior.
- Suppose that I show two groups of observers a film of an exchange of views between an employer and his subordinate. The scene portrays disagreement followed by anger and dismissal. The blame for the difficulty will be assigned very differently by the two groups if I have shown one a scene of the worker earlier in a happy, loving family breakfast setting, while the other group has seen instead a breakfast-table scene where the worker snarls at his family and storms out of the house. The altercation will be understood altogether differently by people who have had favorable or unfavorable glimpses of the character in question.

In business, a worker may perceive an offer of increased authority as a dangerous removal from the safety of assured, though gradual, promotion. A change in channels of authority or reporting, no matter how valuable in increasing efficiency, may

be thought of as a personal challenge or affront. The introduction of a labor-saving process may be perceived as a threat to one's job. An invitation to discuss company policy may be perceived as an elaborate trap to entice one into admitting heretical or disloyal views. A new fringe benefit may be regarded as an excuse not to pay higher salaries. And so on.

An ideal organization should have workers at every level reporting to someone whose dominion is small enough to enable him to know as human beings those who report to him.

Too often, the superior is entirely unprepared for these interpretations, and they seem to him stupid, dishonest, or perverse—or all three. But the successful leader will have been prepared for such responses. He will have known that many of his workers have been brought up to consider their employers as their natural enemies, and that habit has made it second nature for them to “act like an employee” in this respect and always to be suspicious of otherwise friendly overtures from above.

The other side of the same situation is as bad. The habit of acting like a boss can be destructive, too. For instance, much resistance to modern concepts of industrial relations comes from employers who think such ideas pose too great a threat to the long-established picture of themselves as business autocrats. Their image makes progress in labor relations difficult.

Troubles of a Subordinate

But another and still more subtle factor may intervene between employer and employee—a factor that will be recognized and dealt with by successful industrial leaders. That factor is the psychological difficulty of being a subordinate. It is not easy to be a subordinate. If I take orders from another, it limits the scope of

my independent decision and judgment; certain areas are established within which I do what he wishes instead of what I wish. To accept such a role without friction or rebellion, I must find in it a reflection of some form of order that goes beyond my own personal situation (i.e., my age, class, rank, and so forth), or perhaps find that the balance of dependence and independence actually suits my needs. These two possibilities lead to different practical consequences.

For one thing, it is harder to take orders from one whom I do not consider in some sense superior. It is true that one of the saddest failures in practical leadership may be the executive who tries so hard to be one of the boys that he destroys any vestige of awe that his workers might have had for him, with the consequence that they begin to see him as a man like themselves and to wonder why they should take orders from him. An understanding leader will not let his workers think that he considers them inferiors, but he may be wise to maintain a kind of psychological distance that permits them to accept his authority without resentment.

When one of two people is in a superior position and must make final decisions, he can hardly avoid frustrating the aims of the subordinate, at least on occasion. And frustration seems to lead to aggression. That is, thwarting brings out a natural tendency to fight back. It does not take much thwarting to build up a habit of being ready to attack or defend oneself when dealing with the boss.

The situation is made worse if the organization is such that open anger toward the boss is unthinkable, for then the response to frustration is itself frustrated, and a vicious cycle is started. Suggestion boxes, grievance committees, departmental rivalries, and other such devices may serve as lightning rods for the day-to-day hostility engendered by the frustrations inherent in being a subordinate. But in the long run an effective leader will be aware of the need to balance dependence with independence, constraint with autonomy, so that the inevitable psychological consequences of taking orders do not loom too large.

Better yet, he will recognize that many people are frightened by complete independence and need to feel the security of a system that prescribes limits to their freedom. He will try to adjust the amounts and kinds of freedom to fit the psychological needs of his subordinates. Generally this means providing a developmental program in which the employee can be given some sense of where he is going within the company, and the effective leader will make sure that the view is a realistic one. Here an analogy may be helpful:

Nothing is more destructive of morale in any group situation than a phony democracy of the kind one finds in some families. Parents who announce that the children are going to participate share-and-share-alike in all decisions soon find that they cannot, in fact, let them, and when the program fails, the children are especially thwarted. They come to perceive each of the necessarily frequent decisions that are not made by vote or consultation as arbitrary. They develop a strong sense of injustice and rebellion.

The successful leader knows that many workers have been brought up to consider their employers as their natural enemies.

In industry the same conditions hold. It is no good to pretend that certain decisions can be made by subordinates if in fact they cannot. To make dependency tolerable, the lines must be clearly drawn between those decisions that are the prerogative of the superior and those that can be made by or in consultation with the subordinate. Once those lines have been drawn, it is essential not to transgress them any more often than is absolutely necessary.

Ideally, the subordinate should have an area within which he is free to operate without anyone looking over his shoulder. The superior should clarify the goals and perhaps suggest alternative ways of achieving them, but the subordinate should feel free to make the necessary choices. That ideal may sound artificial to autocrats of “the old school,” and, if it does, it will mean nothing even if they give lip service to it. If the worker knows that the boss likes plan A, he is not going to try plan B and risk his job if it fails. If he knows that his job rides on every major decision, he can only play safe by identifying himself in every case with his superior’s views. But that makes him an automaton who can bring no additional intelligence to the organization nor free his superiors from any decisions. He earns the respect of no one—not even the boss who helped make him that way.

Goals in Development

No decision is worth the name unless it involves the balancing of risks and returns. If it were a sure thing, we would not need a man to use his judgment about it. Mistakes are inevitable. What we must expect of employees is that they learn from their mistakes, not that they never make them. It should be the executive’s concern to watch the long-term growth of his men to see that, as they learn, their successes increasingly outweigh their failures.

This concept of long-run growth is a vital part of continuing leadership. Each man must be permitted to know that his role in the group is subject to development and that its development is limited only by his contributions. Especially, he must see the leader as the man most interested in and helpful toward his growth. It is not enough to have interested personnel officers or other staff people who play no role in policy making. Despite all the assistance they can render in technical ways, they can never take the place of an interest on the part of the responsible executive.

Dealing with Tact

At just this point, one often finds misconceptions. No sensible person wishes to make of the executive a substitute for father or psychiatrist or even director of personnel. His interest can and should be entirely impersonal and unsentimental. He might put it to the employee somewhat as follows:

“There is nothing personal about this. Anyone in your post would get the same treatment. But as long as you work for me, I am going to see that you get every opportunity to use your last ounce of potential. Your growth and satisfaction are a part of my job. The faster you develop into a top contributor to this company, the better I will like it. If you see a better way to do your job, do it that way; if something is holding you back, come and see me about it. If you are right, you will get all the help I can give you plus the recognition you deserve.”

No genuine growth of an employee will occur without some teaching. The superior must from time to time take cognizance of the successes and failures and make sure that the subordinate sees them and their consequences as he does. And at this point of assessment a gravely difficult aspect of leadership arises. How can criticism be impersonal and still effective? How can a decision or a method be criticized without the worker feeling that he is personally being demeaned?

The importance of adequate communication at this point is twofold. Not only may long-range damage be done to employee morale, but a quite specific short-range effect is often the employee's failure to do what he should toward carrying out the boss's alternative plan, since its failure might prove that he had been right in the first place. It is all too easy for a leader to produce antagonism and defensiveness by dealing impersonally with a problem and forgetting the human emotions and motives that are involved in it.

Interestingly enough, such failures seem to happen more often in office situations than anywhere else, and we might well wonder if we have not tended to insulate behavior in management from behavior outside—in the home, for instance. We do not assume that an order or a memorandum is the best way of making our wishes acceptable at home. Most reasonably bright people learn early in life how to get others to cooperate. It is second nature to create a personal and emotional setting that is right for the particular person (e.g., wife, adult son, teenage daughter, or child) and for the particular request that is to be made.

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More than that, we are likely to know which aspects of, say, a vacation plan to stress to make it seem attractive to the wife who wants to be waited on, the son who wants to fish, or the daughter who wants adolescent companions. We are likely to learn, too, that one of these may be more readily persuaded if she has a hand in the decision-making process, while another wishes only to have a ready-made plan submitted for his approval or disdain. Indeed, we probably respond to such differences at home with very little thought.

But in the office we lay aside our everyday intuitive skills in human relations and put on the mask of an employer or an executive. We try to handle our tasks with orders or directives impersonally aimed at whoever happens to be responsible for their execution, forgetting that effective mobilization of human resources always requires the voluntary participation of all. Leadership is an interaction among people. It requires followers with particular traits and particular skills and a leader who knows how to use them.

Secrets of a Symphony Orchestra Conductor

The director of an orchestra may perhaps serve as a useful model for some of the important relationships which run through all leadership situations:

1. Obvious enough in this context, but not always remembered, is the fact that the men must have the requisite skills and training for their roles. Not all group failures are the boss's fault. Toscanini could not get great music from a high-school band.
2. A psychological setting must be established for the common task. A conductor must set up his ground rules, his signals, and his tastes in such a way that the mechanics of getting a rehearsal started do not interfere with the musical purpose. Just as the conductor must establish agreement about promptness at rehearsals, talking or smoking between numbers, new versus old music, and a dozen other things that might otherwise come between him and his colleagues in their common aim, so every office or factory must have rules or customs which are clearly understood and easily followed.
3. Most important of all, the musicians must share satisfaction with their leader in the production of music or of music of a certain quality. Unless they individually achieve a sense of accomplishment or even fulfillment, his leadership has failed and he will not make great music. Some distinguished conductors have been petty tyrants; others play poker with their musicians and become godfathers to their babies. These matters are essentially irrelevant. What the great conductor achieves is each instrumentalist's conviction that he is taking part in the making of a kind of music that could only be made under such a leader. Personal qualities and mannerisms may have

a secondary importance; they may serve as reminders, reinstating and reinforcing the vital image of a man with the highest musical standards. But no one can become a Toscanini by imitating his mannerisms.

“Low-Pressure” Leadership

These simple facts are often overlooked. In industry we can find endless numbers of executives who merely mimic the surface characteristics of some successful colleague or superior without ever trying to find ways to enlist the active participation of their own staffs by showing them ways to personal fulfillment in the common task.

These executives take the approach that a certain type of salesman takes; and it is significant, I think, that the financial, manufacturing, and research staffs of many companies look on salesmen as a necessary evil, and would be horrified at the thought of bringing what they consider a “sales approach” into management. Their reason may never be clearly formulated, but it surely has something to do with an air of trickery and manipulation that surrounds some advertising, marketing, and selling. The salesmen and advertisers I refer to are often willing to seek and exploit a weak point in their customer’s defenses and make a sale even when they suspect or perhaps know that the customer will live to regret the purchase.

Slick uses of social and psychological tricks can indeed result in persuading another to do your bidding, but they are unfit for a continuing human relationship. As every truly constructive salesman knows, a business transaction should benefit both buyer and seller. And that means finding out the needs of the customer, making sure that he understands them himself, and providing him with a product that will satisfy that need. Trained in such an approach, the salesman should be the executive par excellence, carrying over into administrative dealings with people what he has been using in sales.

By contrast, the tricky, fast-talking manipulator who prides himself on outwitting his customers, who counts on selling a man cigarettes by playing on his vanity or selling a woman cosmetics by playing on her ambition, might turn into an executive with the same contempt for his workers that he had previously for his customers. If he enjoys hoodwinking his workers by playing on their motives and their interests, they will soon discover that they are being toyed with, and the loyalty and confidence that are an essential ingredient of effective leadership will be corroded away.

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In the last resort, an executive must use his skills and his human insight as does an orchestra leader—to capture individual satisfactions in the common enterprise and to create fulfillment that holds the subordinate to his part. No collection of cute tricks of enticement or showmanship can do that for him.

Leadership, despite what we sometimes think, consists of a lot more than just “understanding people,” “being nice to people,” or not “pushing other people around.” Democracy is sometimes thought to imply no division of authority, or to imply that everyone can be his own boss. Of course, that is nonsense, especially in business. But business leadership can be democratic in the sense of providing the maximum opportunity for growth to each worker without creating anarchy.

In fact, the orderly arrangement of functions and the accurate perception of a leader’s role in that arrangement must always precede the development of his abilities to the maximum. A leader’s job is to provide that recognition of roles and functions within the group that will permit each member to satisfy and fulfill some major motive or interest.

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